

The Hardest Key to Leadership: Moral Authority at the Small Unit Level

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The military services often consign the whole of moral leadership to the realm of rectitude — that is, the individual leader as an upright, honest individual. There is nothing at all wrong with expecting leaders to behave in an ethical manner, but leadership is more complex than that. One could not describe Napoleon as a particularly moral or ethical man — in fact, quite the opposite. Yet, he had great moral authority over his Soldiers.

Why?

There is good reason for demanding that today's leaders be moral in their behavior. It is rather hard to demand high morals from Soldiers if their leaders are not moral themselves. It is just this lack of morality that results in situations such as My Lai.

How do leaders obtain authority? First, they get it through law. There are statutes that govern leadership in the military called Army Regulations, which prescribe penalties if orders are not obeyed. This legal basis for orders has been a vital part of successful military forces, almost since the first Soldiers. Roman infantry leaders, by law, were given enormous control of their Soldiers.

Roman commanders could punish their Soldiers for the simplest offenses. For entire units that did not do their duty in battle, there was the judgment of decimation — the execution of every tenth man until all were gone or the punishment was suspended.

During World War II, commanders also had considerable legal authority, but because of the excesses at Litchfield Disciplinary Barracks in England and the aftermath of the scandal — the Doolittle Board — much of the power of the officer corps to discipline Soldiers at lower levels was taken away. Today, officers have much less legal authority at lower levels.

An officer, or NCO for that matter, achieves authority by being a professional — that is, being a better Soldier than all those under his command. Obviously, Soldiers are not going to follow a complete idiot into battle — at least, not for long.

The Army develops its professional core of officers by using a system of mentoring, increasing responsibilities, and training. Officers start at low levels, and then by both experience and training are entrusted with greater and greater responsibilities. Most armies today use a similar system. It works and has worked for hundreds of years.

But the most important aspect of successful leadership is the level of moral authority used by leaders to win in battle. History shows that this is a matter of situations often outside the control of the leader concerned. The leader may inherit a situation for which moral authority cannot produce obedience or may be too far removed to exercise it.

Take the Duo, as they were called in World War I — Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and General Eric Ludendorff. They, in effect, ruled Germany for about the last 14-15 months of the war. At the end, they lacked moral authority because it eroded over time, and they, particularly

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Ludendorff, did not understand the concept, or did not care that it had eroded. Their only answer was to enforce discipline rigidly, but this did not make the situation any better. The rot had progressed beyond the power of discipline to restore the balance.

Another case involves a battalion commander in Vietnam as recorded by Keith Nolan in *Ripcord: Screaming Eagles Under Siege*, Vietnam, 1970. The commander — Lieutenant Colonel Andre Lucas — is a subject of differing opinions in his own battalion. There are those who like him — largely in the officer or senior NCO ranks — and those who do not — normally private Soldiers. The former believed that Lucas was a competent commander, and the latter thought he

risked their lives without careful consideration.

The principal reason for this has nothing to do with Lucas himself but the way he exercises command. The system of using a command and control helicopter in battle had begun long before he arrived in Vietnam. It was used by all the major commanders as a way to “see” the battlefield, but how much of the battle they actually saw was open to question. In certain types of terrain, this worked, but not in the area around II Corps. There the terrain restricted visibility so that while the battle was going on, and the commander was trying to exercise control, he could not really see anything. He depended solely on what he was being told through radio conversation.

This is what griped the “grunts.” They could not believe that Lucas could see what was going on, or get a feeling for the action simply by listening to his company commanders through his radiotelephone. There is some truth to this, and the grunts wanted him to come down to ground level and be with them all the time.

They concluded this on the basis of the orders he gave, and his frequent disagreements with the company commanders of his own units who were right there. One captain ruined his career by directly challenging his commander's tactical view of the situation. Nolan points out, though, that this had some effect on Lucas, and on the attack — to which the captain had objected — was later called off.

In one of the final chapters of the book, Captain Hawkins and his company have been having a very successful operation until Lucas orders them to move along a particular line to a new location. The captain does not want to go this way because he believes — rightly, as it turns out — that he is heading into a potential ambush. Lucas had a skewed opinion of what was going on. He could see parts of the terrain better than his troops on the ground, but that was all. They had a feeling about the situation that he could not be a

part of. He could not understand because he wasn't on the ground.

Unlike the grunts, Lucas had a better view of the larger picture, but he may not have articulated that to those on the ground. His knowledge in space and time was better from his perch high above, and he was in contact with other units, other sources of information, and he had to put them together while directing a battle he could not physically see.

Today, the Army is transforming itself by using technology. No longer will officers be able to view the entire number of their Soldiers over a long battlefield. Their vision, however, may be a bit better because the drones above the battle will be able to see through fog, trees, etc., to show the enemy's true layout. This must be made clear to the troops so that they know the commander can see the whole picture, including their smaller part of it.

But if moral authority depends to a degree on physical presence, this could be a problem in the future. Leaders will now be voices on a radio system, and the problems of the Vietnam command and control ships will be compounded even more. What if a commander of a major unit is removed, and a new voice comes on line that the subordinates may or may not recognize. Are you likely to obey someone you don't know simply because that person's rank is superior?

In other words, the more remote technology makes commanders, the harder it will be for them to exercise the force of moral authority. This could be a bigger problem in the technological age. Technology, to some degree, separates Soldiers from their leaders and from other Soldiers as well. They can do more by themselves. This tends to reinforce the idea of independence when someone knows technology and uses technology instead of another individual with less knowledge.

For instance, what if you know how to make a program work on the computer, and your boss doesn't really know how to do it? Who is superior now? The boss still is, by the threat of moral authority, but how long will that last under stress?

The biggest problem will be at the small unit level where individuals command by force of presence and ability, not necessarily by law. At the end of World War I, Hindenburg and Ludendorff may have controlled their immediate levels of command, but they did not control the larger units of their own army. The Soldiers would defend but would no longer attack.

By April 1918, the German army was on its last legs. Officers had trouble getting their Soldiers to do much more than defend against attacks. Morale had reached rock bottom. Ludendorff in particular blamed everyone but himself for the situation.

He viewed the problems as a lack of discipline. To some degree, he was right, but there can be no useful discipline in the long run if there is no moral authority. When an officer orders an NCO to punish a Soldier for a transgression, what happens if the NCO does not act on the order? The German Army was tired, it no longer had any fight left in it, and the Soldiers wanted to go home.

Hindenburg and Ludendorff failed to realize that they had lost their moral authority. After the end of the war, they blamed the "spineless" civilians who "stabbed them in the back" when it was the Army's own fault for their lack of victory. This would lead to

an unfortunate repetition with Hitler and the German Army. In the end, the loss of World War II was their fault and not his.

Moral authority in combat is based on two pillars—that the subordinates believe the commander issuing the orders has a good tactical understanding of the situation and trust him, and that the individual giving the orders has been on the ground and not orbiting over the battlefield in a command and control ship.

You will never get the Soldiers to believe a commander has the knowledge unless they see him on the ground with them. That's where moral authority comes from and history supports this.

Napoleon's morality wasn't of the best, but thousands of Frenchmen died for him all over the world, with many shouting "Vive le' Emperor!" Why? Because he had demonstrated his courage many times before, and he could often be found up front where his Soldiers could see him.

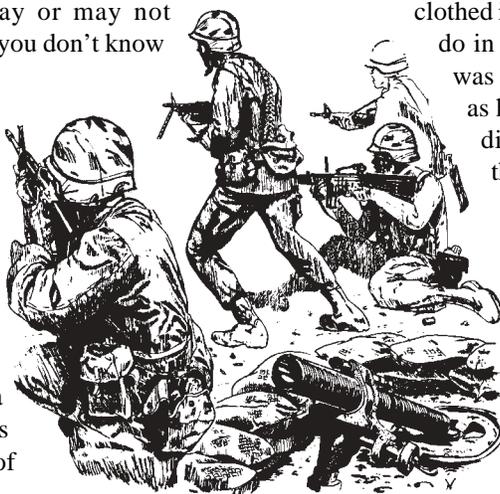
Frederick the Great cared little about his Soldiers as human beings, and that's a matter of fact. Whether they were fed or clothed interested him little — only what they could do in combat mattered. Frederick's generalship was often suspected as he won as many battles as he lost. He was often careless with tactical dispositions and as a result, his army lost thousands of men.

Yet these very same Soldiers would gladly have died for him. Was it the iron discipline of the Prussian Army or something else? Frederick, whatever else his tactical faults were — and he had many — was seen up front with the men. They believed that up front, he knew what he was doing and so followed his orders.

That hasn't really changed in war through the centuries. Commanders must be on the spot. When General Berry was in Vietnam with the 101st would often spend a night with troops on the firebase when he could have been back at division main having a drink and a steak dinner.

His choosing to spend time with his troops magnified his moral authority over them. They followed because he showed he cared by sharing their dangers. Remember that Joshua Chamberlain of the 20th Maine in the American Civil War had great moral authority over his men because he stood up in the middle of his position on Little Round Top right with them. He didn't direct his regiment from a safer place to the rear.

Robert E. Lee removed two brigade commanders from command after Gettysburg for commanding from the rear. Lee, too, understood that the force of moral authority is based on being there, up front. Technology must take that into consideration and find a way to compensate for it, or the system will fail.



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